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Book Review: O'Sullivan, E. & O'Donnell, E. (2012). Coercive Confinement in Ireland. Patients, Prisoners and Penitents

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O'Sullivan, E. & O'Donnell, E. (2012). Coercive confinement in Ireland. Patients, prisoners and penitents. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN: 9780719086489.

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In 1957 Minister for Justice Oscar Traynor T.D. stated:

> The fact that we have been able to close at least three prisons is a step forward for this country. We should pat ourselves on the back for that fact. I do not suppose there is another nation in the world that is in the happy position of being able to close prisons (*Dáil Debates*, vol 161, col 423, March 26 1957).

While Ireland may not have been incarcerating people in large numbers in the 1950s in its prisons, the use of confinement of other kinds was extensive. Ireland is still only coming to terms with the clear evidence which has emerged of shameful and degrading practices within many institutions for those considered to be exhibiting various kinds of 'deviant' behaviour.

There are many questions surrounding the establishment, retention and use of these institutions. One of the most disquieting and persistent is how were these places able to exist for so long, with, in many cases, the support of elite members of society?

While some survivors of those institutions begin to find a voice to express their experiences, the absence of documentary material from the period in which these institutions was used has also been striking. O'Sullivan and O'Donnell's seminal work brings together contemporary accounts of life within some of those institutions along with perceptions of those places. It is a stark reminder of the silencing and silence of those detained in many that O'Sullivan and O'Donnell were unable to find any memoirs or records from those who lived in Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene laundries. The extracts the authors have included, which come from newspapers, periodicals and some government reports, provide a fascinating glimpse into how these institutions were viewed. The accounts they uncovered of those who had spent time in other institutions provide a rare glimpse into how those institutions were experienced.

The book is divided into three parts, each dealing with a particular 'kind' of confinement: Part I is entitled *Patients, paupers and unmarried mothers*; Part II – *Prisoners*; and Part III – *Troubled and troublesome children*. The authors use an impressive variety of materials, such as government reports, journalistic pieces and articles from contemporary periodicals. The archival research involved must have been significant and demonstrates the value of such endeavour.

The pieces span the account of a man who considered his period of confinement to have been something of a redemption, to that of a prisoner who in 'The Spyhole' recounts the fear engendered by the peephole in a prison cell, providing a powerful symbol of the loneliness and surveillance at the heart of much of institutionalised life. There are accounts arguing for such places, but the sophisticated analysis provided by the authors indicates that the responsibility for the endurance of these institutions is tangled across Irish society and not only within the Catholic Church.

This book will be viewed as an important contribution to the literature understanding the sociological and cultural history of Ireland, but also the growing criminological analyses of Ireland's experiences of confinement and constructions of deviance.

While the book is likely to attract readers wishing to understand this particular dimension of Ireland's past, this work has much broader implications and relevance to our understanding of changing patterns of imprisonment. The authors make the valid point that much criminological musing in recent times has focused on rates of imprisonment, which are increasing in many countries, and quite dramatically in the case of Ireland. While this trend is undoubtedly worthy of study, and indeed concern, it has perhaps diverted criminological attention away from developments within other loci of detention. It may be the case that the ready comparability of prison rates across jurisdictions has been one of the drivers sustaining this flourishing of academic interest and discussion.

O'Sullivan and O'Donnell go a long way in this book in their attempts to shift the apparently stubborn (and perhaps unthinking) focus of criminologists on imprisonment rates and characteristics and onto other sites of what can be equally powerful and keenly felt forms of detention. Aspects of the book echo Lucia Zedner's (2002) call to avoid dystopic visions of the present state of criminal justice and control institutions. O'Sullivan and O'Donnell show us that the Irish case has much to offer understandings of decarceration and should prompt investigations into examples where overall levels of institutionalisation have fallen over time.

One of the most intriguing elements of the book concerns O'Donnell and O'Sullivan's analysis of why it is Ireland resorted to the use of detention on such a wide scale during these years. The authors add a rich and complex set of interpretations to the familiar ones concerning a repressive form of sexual morality prevalent in the State and a culture of avoiding public shame. O'Sullivan and O'Donnell present us with an Ireland which used detention as a way to manage surplus, as much as 'deviant', populations. The harshness of subsistence farming and the mechanisms of inheritance where only one child could hope to make a living from agricultural holdings meant that the often large number of siblings had to be managed in other ways. Not only did children pose a problem with respect to economic viability, older single people were similarly threatening to the precarious economic order. O'Sullivan and O'Donnell show us that some of the drivers into detention related to the need to find ways of dealing with these 'excess' populations. Those of us who lived through such times, or have heard stories passed down from parents or grandparents living in rural areas, are likely to have heard the seemingly unbelievable stories and memories of older people being sent by members of their family to psychiatric institutions in order to avoid difficulties with

respect to inheritance. O'Sullivan and O'Donnell provide us with a theoretical and rigorous framework in which to place those accounts. Though not its main focus, it is to be hoped that scholars will use this work to examine how rural economic factors in Ireland and elsewhere were related to its patterns of detention.

This book deserves to stimulate fresh thinking within the sociology of punishment and detention, particularly the relationships (or lack thereof) between prisons and other sites of confinement. There is much to explore with respect to how developing welfare state mechanisms have contributed to the reduction in the use of confinement.

More prosaically, the extracts in this book will be of interest to those wishing to understand Ireland's past, but perhaps some of its greatest impact will be amongst those readers who have lived through this period of high walls and whispers.

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